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ABSTRACT

The National Workforce Assistance Collaborative (NWAC) was established by the National Alliance of Business to provide assistance to community colleges and other organizations that offer programs to increase business productivity. The NWAC is charged with building the capacity of service providers that work with small and mid-sized companies in the areas of workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations. To inform its efforts, the Collaborative held 18 focus groups across the country with service providers, company representatives, and employees and employee representatives and established 5 advisory groups to review operational plans. The NWAC is unique among organizations serving businesses in that it focuses on ways to provide integrated literacy and technical training to small and mid-sized businesses. Efforts will focus on identifying best practices among service providers and establishing efforts to collect and disseminate information through a National Resource Network and an electronic clearinghouse providing descriptions of service providers and existing programs, case studies, and training and other resource materials. The Collaborative will also undertake ongoing marketing and feedback efforts to raise awareness about the need to improve services. For community colleges, the NWAC will prove a valuable resource by building private sector demand for college services. (KP)

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Terri Bergman

Paper Presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of Community Colleges (75th, Minneapolis, MN, April 22-24, 1994)

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THE NATIONAL WORKFORCE ASSISTANCE COLLABORATIVE:
A New Institution with Plans to Improve Workforce Services

By: Terri Bergman, National Alliance of Business

Companies today need to produce higher quality and more varied products, more quickly, and at a lower price if they are to compete -- and survive -- in our global economy. This need to produce better, faster, and cheaper requires changes in the ***workplace*** *and in the* ***workforce.***

The link between workplace and workforce changes is clear: new and better production processes require employees to master new -- and frequently more difficult -- skills. One employee summed up workplace and workforce changes by saying that "technology is speeding everything up; quality is being pushed down to the production line, and taken away from separate inspectors; employees are being given access to on-line information and data needed for setting up their jobs; and employees are being cross trained to enhance staff flexibility" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. XVI-3).

Companies, particularly small ones, frequently require help making needed workplace changes and building their employees' skills. A business representative, commenting on this need for assistance, noted that "the country needs to focus on educating those currently in the workforce. Community colleges and other institutions need to work together to provide services in ways that meet the needs of small and mid-sized companies. Small companies do not have the time or money to locate the resources they need to educate their workforces. Forums that bring companies together to talk about these issues are good opportunities to learn about existing resources" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. VII-

8).

There are a number of organizations in America today, including community colleges, that help companies become more productive. However, there is little assistance given to these organizations to help them learn from each other, work together, and improve the quality of their services. The National Workforce Assistance Collaborative is designed to do precisely that.

What is the National Workforce Assistance Collaborative?

The *National Workforce Assistance Collaborative* is a national resource for technical assistance in workforce and workplace development. Operated by the National Alliance of Business and its partners[1] from a $650,000 annual Department of Labor grant, the Collaborative works through business assistance and information intermediaries (service providers) to ensure that companies and workers have easy access to the information and resources -- including training technologies -- needed to support continuous learning in the workplace.

The Collaborative is charged with building the capacity of the service providers that work with small and mid-sized companies in the areas of workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations. Capacity building, however, is not so much the end as the means for enabling businesses to adopt high-performance work

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[1] Fu Associates, Inc., Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Maryland Center for Quality and Productivity, National Labor-Management Association, National Tooling and Machining Association, and William L. Batt, Jr.

practices, become more competitive, and ultimately, to advance the well being of their employees.

The Collaborative is the brain child of the U. S. Department of Labor. Several years ago, the department realized that ensuring the well being of American workers required expanding its own efforts beyond an emphasis on individuals who either lost jobs or were not yet in the workforce, to include a focus on *incumbent*, or existing, workers. Recognizing that a number of organizations -- particularly community colleges -- already provide services to workplaces and incumbent workers, the department decided to concentrate its workplace extension strategy on *leveraging* and *building on* the existing services.

The Collaborative is the cornerstone of the department's workplace extension strategy, identifying, developing, and disseminating high quality information, curricula, resources, handbooks, and technical assistance on worker training and high-performance workplace practices.

How was the Collaborative's strategic agenda developed?

To direct its work, the Collaborative engaged its key stakeholders in an extensive strategic planning process. It held eighteen focus groups across the country with service providers, representatives of small and mid-sized companies, and employees and employee representatives. It researched and produced briefing papers detailing current service delivery structures in each of the four substantive areas (workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations), along with the strengths and weaknesses of

these structures.

Five advisory groups -- composed of representatives of small and mid-sized companies, service providers, and unions, as well as recognized experts in the areas of workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations -- reviewed the Collaborative's research and developed strategic and operational plans.

The community college system played a large role in the Collaborative's planning process. Community college representatives participated in a number of the Collaborative's focus groups and served on most of the five advisory groups.

Community colleges are likely to play a significant role as the Collaborative moves from planning to implementation. Their representatives will continue to serve on the Collaborative's advisory groups, and community colleges across the nation will serve as a source of existing information, resources, and tools, and figure strongly in the Collaborative's dissemination network.

What is the Collaborative's unique and value-added niche?

The strategic planning process concluded that the Collaborative's greatest value would be in:

> Identifying existing information, resources, and tools related to workforce development, and making these materials widely available among service providers and small and mid-sized companies;
>
> Developing and disseminating new products and tools to fill the gaps between

what already exists and what companies and service providers need, particularly:

- Products and tools focused on ways to provide *integrated* services -- services encompassing workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations -- to small and mid-sized businesses, and
- Products and tools focused on effective ways to develop and deliver services to the smaller companies that are the target of the Collaborative's activities;

Raising companies' awareness of the kinds of changes they need to make in order to become more competitive, and informing them of the variety of places they can go to gain assistance in making these changes; and

Building connections between service providers and small and mid-sized businesses in order to help the providers be more responsive to companies' needs.

The Collaborative's focus on *integrated* services and on services to *small and mid-sized* businesses is what makes the Collaborative truly unique. Most service delivery operates in narrow, discrete silos. For example, those who provide workplace literacy services rarely communicate with those providing work restructuring or labor-management relations services. Funding streams, professional networking opportunities, and professional literature are all separate and distinct.

Yet the reality is that, within the companies, the four substantive areas are all linked.

For example, work restructuring efforts usually require changes in the roles and responsibilities of employees and managers, thus labor-management relations comes into play. Restructuring also often entails new worker skill requirements, necessitating technical training services. And, of course, technical training won't be successful unless employees have the workplace literacy skills needed to understand the training.

Traditionally, the responsibility for putting all these pieces together has rested with the companies themselves -- and small companies rarely realize they have the need for all the pieces, let alone have the skills to pull them all together. The Collaborative, by working *across* the four areas, will be able to see the big picture, communicate it to the various service providers, and help the providers themselves to deliver integrated services.

The other unique aspect of the Collaborative is its focus on small and mid-sized businesses. Most case studies of successful practices showcase large companies, and most materials and tools are designed to meet large company needs. In addition, most service providers focus on larger companies. Large companies are the most able to pay for services, and it is easier to market to large companies. Furthermore, it is difficult to customize services for small and mid-sized firms cost-effectively. "In companies, products and services are geared to people who can pay, i.e., large companies. Less is available and the quality is lower for smaller businesses." (Tuttle, 1994, p. 6).

The Collaborative will fill in the void of information on and tools for small and mid-sized firms. It will discover and publicize the cost-effective strategies for serving these firms and will develop and disseminate appropriate tools and guides. It will help the providers open up a whole new market by creating a demand for services among small and mid-sized firms

and delivering cost-effective strategies for meeting this demand.

The need for materials focused on small and mid-sized firms was a frequent refrain among the Collaborative's focus group participants. Business focus group participants "asked that materials be provided on how successful *small* businesses made changes. Small companies, they pointed out, need to learn from other small companies, not large companies" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. VII-4).

What activities will the Collaborative undertake?

The Collaborative's strategic agenda requires work in three areas:

Identifying and developing products to strengthen service providers and enable businesses to adopt high-performance work practices;

Creating a system to collect and disseminate information and resources to service providers and small and mid-sized businesses; and

Conducting a marketing program to ensure Collaborative products and services meet businesses' and service providers' needs.

Product Identification and Development.

The Collaborative recognizes that a great number of products already exist to meet the needs of service providers and small and mid-sized companies in the areas of workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the Collaborative will 1) identify existing products, 2) adapt, when necessary, some of these products to meet the needs of its target customers, and 3) develop

new products to fill any unmet needs.

The Collaborative has an ally in its product development work. At the same time that the U. S. Department of Labor created the National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, it created the *National Center for the Workplace*. A consortium of universities led by the University of California at Berkeley, the Center will be conducting practical research on issues of concern to the Collaborative. This research will serve as the foundation for much of the Collaborative's product development.

A primary focus of the Collaborative's product development work will be on "best practice" models, including:

Best practice in each of the four substantive areas;

Best practice in providing services that *integrate* workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations assistance;

Best practice in efficient development and delivery of services to the smaller companies that are the target of the Collaborative's efforts;

Best practice in adopting and managing high-performance work practices within small and mid-sized companies;

Best practice in company (rather than service provider) -led workforce development programs; and

Best practice in public policies that facilitate and support both cost-effective and integrated service delivery *and* the adoption of high-performance work practices.

The research and development work the Collaborative has planned is designed to meet

the needs of its customers. One business focus group participant said that "small and mid-sized companies would benefit from benchmarking or examples of best practice in small and mid-sized businesses" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. III-7). Another participant said that "what was needed were case studies, success stories, and information on how to undertake the changes that led to success" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. VII-7).

Information Collection and Dissemination.

In its original vision for the Collaborative, the Department of Labor put a great deal of emphasis on the collection and dissemination of information. The importance of this emphasis is apparent in a business focus group participant's suggestion that "there is a wealth of information available, but [only] a limited number of people know where it is and how to access it" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. IV-7).

The Collaborative has developed two strategies for its dissemination effort, a "National Resource Network" and an electronic clearinghouse.

National Resource Network. The Collaborative cannot hope to reach all of the service providers and small and mid-sized companies that comprise its target customers without assistance. Therefore, the Collaborative intends to develop a National Resource Network made up of the service provider, business, and union associations representing the Collaborative's customer base.

The Collaborative plans to enter into formal agreements with these associations, specifying the roles and responsibilities of both Network members and the Collaborative. For example, the Collaborative would ask Network

members to publish articles on the Collaborative in their newsletters, distribute flyers and brochures on Collaborative activities in some of their mailings, carry advertisements of Collaborative products in their newsletters, and invite representatives of the Collaborative to speak at their conferences. In exchange, the Collaborative would provide Network members (and their members) with cutting-edge information and technical assistance, as well as visibility within the Collaborative's activities.

The Network would not only serve as a dissemination system, but also as a collection system. The Collaborative's product identification task (discussed above) will rely heavily on Network members. Because of this, Network members would have the opportunity to make their products part of the Collaborative's dissemination efforts, expanding their own marketing efforts significantly.

Electronic Clearinghouse. The Collaborative also intends to be a part of the "information superhighway." Instead of physically collecting products and tools, the Collaborative will enter details on them into an electronic clearinghouse. This clearinghouse will have information on service providers, program descriptions and case studies, training and program materials, and resource materials. The clearinghouse will provide a link to other clearinghouses with workforce development information, rather than duplicate the efforts of those clearinghouses. Eventually, the clearinghouse may include such services as electronic mail, forums, bulletin boards, and file transfer.

Network members, as well as individual service providers and small and mid-sized companies, would be allowed access to the clearinghouse.

The Collaborative's information collection and dissemination strategy is supported by its customers. Members of one advisory group noted that, while quality products exist, service providers lack a "delivery capacity" for sharing the products among themselves (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994b, p. 3). Collaborative research found that "it is really tough for service providers to get up-to-date, applied information if they are not connected to the right sources. This is especially true for the service providers that are most likely to be providing services to small businesses" (Tuttle, 1994, p. 4).

Marketing and Feedback.

Offering programs and services that are responsive to customer needs is a simple, but meaningful, description of what marketing is all about. Therefore, the Collaborative's marketing efforts will be closely linked with its evaluation efforts.

The Collaborative intends to undertake an ongoing communication program with service providers and small and mid-sized businesses. This communication program will:

Raise service providers' and companies' awareness about the need to change, particularly the need for service providers to deliver integrated services, and the need for companies to adopt high-performance work practices.

"There are few mechanisms to encourage reluctant CEOs of small and mid-sized businesses to change. Most service providers only serve those that are already `turned on'" (Tuttle, 1994, p. 4). Service providers in our focus

groups echoed the need for encouraging businesses to change. One participant said that "businesses need to understand the value of investing time and money in long term programs. Small businesses need to understand that training can work for them, not just for big companies" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. XIII-7).

Inform service providers and companies about the Collaborative and the information and services it can provide, as well as about the existence and services of other providers they can turn to for help.

Some service provider participants "admitted that they needed help marketing their services to small and mid-sized companies. One participant noted that, while he did well marketing his services to large companies, and was beginning to develop services to meet the needs of mid-sized companies, he really didn't know how to communicate with or serve really small companies. It wasn't often that he saw small and mid-sized businesses at his seminars" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. XIV-2).

Other service provider focus group participants spoke specifically about the difficulty or marketing *community college* services. They noted that "there are many service providers and variety of classes available, but many companies are not being serviced because they don't know what's available. Many companies," they said, "are unaware that community colleges can offer classes that combine employees from one or two companies, and don't consider the idea of having a few employees sign up for scheduled classes in the community

college environment" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. XII-2).

Provide forums for the Collaborative's customers to communicate their needs and suggestions directly to Collaborative staff.

A business focus group participant "had a plea for the Collaborative: `Whatever programs and projects that you come up with, please make them easy to access and easy to use, and above all, don't forget that we are your customers, so please treat us like customers'" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. VIII-9).

In conducting its communication program, the Collaborative will rely on such traditional marketing media as publications and brochures, newsletter articles, conference workshops, and articles in major newspapers and magazines.

On a more innovative note, the Collaborative will adopt a few *interactive* marketing efforts, including both teleconferences and various opportunities for service providers and companies to share ideas among themselves. Such networking opportunities were widely supported by focus group participants. Participants at one business focus group "suggested that networking with other individuals who had faced or were facing similar changes was the most valuable assistance they could receive to help them through the change process. Time and time again, participants talked about the value of meeting with others from small businesses, preferably in similar industries, to share both war stories and successes" (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. VII-3).

The Collaborative will also develop a system for identifying and analyzing individual

customer *segments*, so that it can design and implement a more targeted marketing plan. It will use such mechanisms as surveys, focus groups, and conferences to listen to customer needs and concerns; and it will evaluate Collaborative processes, product content, and product effectiveness in order to improve the services it provides to its customers.

What specific projects can you expect to see from the Collaborative over the next year?

The Collaborative's strategic and operational plans lay out an ambitious agenda for the organization. Collaborative staff are already working on the following specific projects:

Best Practice Definitions. Collaborative staff are working with subject experts, service providers, and companies to develop best practice definitions for workplace literacy, technical training, work restructuring, and labor-management relations. These definitions, by setting a quality standard, will play a large role in the Collaborative's efforts to help providers improve their services to small and mid-sized companies.

The need for defining quality is essential. One business focus group participant suggested that companies "have no trouble finding out about service providers," their problem is in "assessing the quality of the service providers." (National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, 1994a, p. III-8).

Integrated Service Delivery Models. Collaborative staff are conducting field research on models for comprehensive or integrated service delivery. This

research will result in a handbook of best practice models, along with guidelines for determining which models are most appropriate to different situations.

Workforce Development Monographs. Collaborative staff will produce a series of monographs based on the information provided by the focus groups. Among the topics to be covered are the services companies want from providers, and managing the change process in companies.

Electronic Clearinghouse. Collaborative staff are taking steps to get the electronic clearinghouse up and running, entering information on exemplary service providers and resources into an electronic database, developing a system of menus to enable customers to access the data, and laying plans for linking up with other clearinghouses.

A number of other projects are already well into the planning stage, including:

Best Practice Models. Collaborative staff will take the best practice definitions developed in each of the four substantive areas and use them as a base for conducting field research on exemplary delivery models. As part of that research, staff will also examine how the exemplary service providers in each substantive area work with service providers in the other areas.

This research will result in four short publications delineating best practice service delivery in each of the substantive areas, as well as a larger publication focusing on the linkage of the four areas.

National Resource Network. Collaborative staff will begin conversations with key service delivery, business, and union associations to develop a model

agreement delineating roles and responsibilities. This model agreement will then be used to expand the number of Network members.

How will the Collaborative serve community colleges?

The community college system is a key Collaborative customer, and as such, the system and the colleges will receive particular attention from Collaborative staff. As mentioned earlier, community college representatives will be asked to serve on the Collaborative's advisory groups and to join the National Resource Network. Through participation in the Network, community colleges will be able to market their materials outside the community college system, as well as gain access to information, resources, and tools developed elsewhere.

The Collaborative will be a valuable resource to community colleges attempting to improve and expand the services they provide to small and mid-sized businesses. It will build private sector demand for community college services, identify the services companies are seeking from the colleges, and provide information on innovative and exemplary service delivery strategies. In addition, the Collaborative will help community colleges link up with small and mid-sized businesses and forge partnerships with other service deliverers.

Because the community college system is also a key player in the U. S. Department of Labor's workplace extension strategy, additional linkages between the Collaborative and the colleges are likely. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) has received a U. S. Department of Labor grant for a *Workforce Security Project*. As part of this project,

the AACC will:

> Create a national network of community college workforce training providers;
>
> Create a national employment, training, and literacy database of community college programs; and
>
> Plan and conduct a Workforce Development Institute (United States Department of Labor, undated, pp. 4-5).

The Collaborative anticipates establishing strong connections between its National Resource Network and clearinghouse and the AACC's proposed network and database. In addition, the Collaborative hopes to serve as a resource to the AACC's Workforce Development Institute.

The U. S. Department of Labor also sees a synergistic relationship between the Collaborative and the community colleges' Workforce Security Project. The department plans to link the Collaborative, the community college project, and another Department of Labor partnership with the National Institute of Standards and Technology "to form a powerful workforce development enterprise that will promote and support incumbent worker training and high-performance practices" (United States Department of Labor, undated, p. 5).

Clearly, there is a strong commonality of purpose between the Collaborative and the AACC's Workforce Security Project. Over the next few years, it is likely that the Collaborative and the community colleges will find many opportunities for forging a strategic alliance that will help improve the competitiveness of America's small and mid-sized businesses and advance the well being of America's workforce.

For further information on the National Workforce Assistance Collaborative, contact

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